

Editorial



In the sketch on Civil Defence in the revue *Beyond the Fringe*, an audience member asks the panel of civil servants, 'Following the nuclear holocaust, could you tell me when normal public services would be resumed?' For the whole world at the moment this year has been anything but normal, the pandemic having disordered so much in our lives, and it is hard to see how we can ever return to the old 'normal'. With the UK in lockdown I have had the time for plenty of reading including two novels about plagues, Manzoni's *The Betrothed* – Pope Francis' favourite book – and Camus' *The Plague*. The facts presented in both novels mirror so much of the events of this year. Each book has, as a main character, a 'hero', Archbishop Borromeo and Dr. Rieux respectively, who work tirelessly without regard for their own safety to tend to the sick and dying, the former motivated by his Christian faith, the latter, with no faith, but committed to the service of others and, in Merton's words in his essay, 'The Plague of Albert Camus', a "healer" who fights against disease and death because living man remains for him an ultimate, inexplicable value.' Both men could stand as paradigms for the countless doctors, nurses and carers battling the coronavirus. Commenting on Camus' description that 'a pestilence isn't a thing made to man's measure ... a bad dream that will pass away', Merton points out that the plague bears witness to the fact that 'no systematic thinking can be fully realistic if it excludes the radical *absurdity* of an existence into which evil or irrationality can always break without warning.' Covid has certainly broken into our lives without warning and we may never be the same again. And our response reflects our values. Do we prioritise keeping ourselves and others safe, or do we endanger ourselves and others for the sake of the economy, for 'keeping the show on the road'? Merton saw the plague, not only as a physical evil, but as 'a deficiency in the human spirit, a challenge which summons up the deepest resources of the human conscience in its capacity for courage and love.'

In this issue are included several pieces describing their author's experiences of lockdown, and their responses to it. Jill Robson, despite being used to a life of solitude, finds it 'a rich experience in ways I hadn't

expected'; Sister Rachel, a canonical hermit, finds it 'not a time of greater separation, but a time of dwelling deeper within the mystery.' Kenneth Carveley sees parallels between this time of separation and the last visit of Merton's brother, John Paul, to Gethsemani when they were separated in the church, Merton in the choir, and John Paul in the secular part of the church, with John Paul, in Merton's words, 'standing, confused and unhappy, at a distance which he was not able to bridge.' This article is followed by a poem by Brian O'Shea imagining John Paul's conversation to his brother as he lay dying in a dingy in the English Channel. 'Adrift in a sea of loneliness', his death mirrors so many at this time, of those who have died alone or surrounded by masked doctors and nurses, but without the comforting presence of their family and friends. In his article, Oakham, Oakham!, Peter Ellis explores Merton's experiences in the British boarding school system, where 'the community of school involved fear of the others, ... fear of exposing real feelings', with the resultant adult secretive, isolated and unable to trust others; and that it was at Gethsemani that Merton learned to put off this false, ersatz self, and rejoin playful humanity, 'by the very fact of being open to his fellow monks and to the world' about his thoughts and feelings.

Two articles reflect on the Black Lives Matter movement. Martin Wroe, speaking on 'Thought for the day' about the funeral of John Lewis, finds connections with Merton and transformative contemplation; Farai Mapamula bears personal testimony to the inequalities that exist in our society, and challenges how the Church might collectively respond other than with 'the usual platitudinous niceties'. William Apel's article explores Merton's understanding of *The Gita*, relating the transcendence at the very heart of the *Gita* to that at the very heart of the *Gospels*.

In his article 'A Precious Gift', Karl Möller urges us to recalibrate our attitude towards God's precious, beautiful creation, to take greater care of our common home. In many ways this devastating pandemic, whose effects may well be with us for a decade, masks the far greater existential threat of environmental catastrophe creeping up on us all. For Merton, writing in January 1963 to Rachel Carson, we have dared 'to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.'

Before Midnight Mass at Christmas 1941, Merton wrote, 'Lord, it is nearly midnight, and I am waiting for You in darkness, and the great silence.'

So too, in silence and in darkness, we wait for Your peace and Your glory.

Stephen Dunhill